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# Group-Analysis Today

## Summary:

This interview centers on several fundamental points in the “state-of-the-art” of the theoretical model and practice of group analysis in Italy. In particular it underlines the various difficulties in maintaining and developing Burrow’s and Foulkes’s more innovative proposals, and “returns to Freud” in its metapsychological constructions. The interview then considers a number of junctions of Bion’s later thinking, of modern cognitive science and of the paradigm of complexity within the authors’ theoretical model. To conclude, it considers the sense the author gives to the practice of group analysis as an hermeneutic psycho-education.

## How do you view group analysis today?

Group analysis plays an important role in the history of psychology and psychoanalysis. This can be very briefly explained in two comments by S.H. Foulkes. In the first, taken from the foreword to his book *Therapeutic Group Analysis* (1964), he claimed the necessity of a method and a theory able to brush away false counter-positions-such as cultural versus biological origin, psychogenesis versus somatogenesis, individual versus society, fantasy versus reality-in an attempt to utilize concepts that from the start could set up an integrated vision. The second comes from his essay “The group as matrix of an individual’s mental life”(1) and maintains that group-analysis eliminates the need for usual concepts such as the unconscious, repression, defenses, etc., necessary to a psychoanalytic setting.

These two radical theoretical proposals highlight the profound revolution started by group-analysis nearly a century ago, when it was founded by Trigant Burrow, in opposition with a psychoanalysis founded on Freudian metapsychology, whatever its endless re-elaboration in the history of the psychoanalytic movement may have been.

Today, there are two opposing trends within group-analysis: one aims at developing the anthropological and philosophical arguments present in Burrow’s and Foulkes’ thought, and here I gave my personal contributions; the other proposes rather a sort of integration between the classical psychoanalytic postulates relating to psychic monadism (drives and defense mechanisms) and a transpersonal vision of the mind. The latter trend is prevailing, even within the SGAI (the Italian Group-Analytic Society) to which I belong; and in the schools I run in Milan, Rome and Turin “revivals” often appear (sometimes even inadvertently by myself) of the so-called psychoanalytic “*satanic jargon*” (2) (as Bion would later term it).

## How do you view this revival? As something syncretistic, as a regressive weakness, or else as grounds for further reflection?

We cannot speak of syncretism since there are two contrasting points of view (two anthropologies, two epistemologies). Nor would I call it “regression” since this suggests a linear vision of (individual, social or cultural) development, as well as related “defense mechanisms” or “resistances”. I rather think, congruent

with the group-analytic speculation, that cultural matrices *sensu lato* play an important role in such a conservative phenomenology. Matrices lay a clear footprint for the thought formulation process, and no matter how rationally one might opt for logical and behavioral choices which differentiate themselves from biases originating in the matrix, the latter maintain their own vitality, like ghosts that haunt old manors. Yet I don't view this persistence, no matter how old the trend may be, as a "pathological" event: the friction between past and future, between conservation and change, and between an *originary* cultural formation and the possibility of *original* transformation, characterizes the substantial ambiguity of human nature.

### **And what is emerging from group-analytic practice today?**

Group-analysis should first of all deal with its very cultural matrices. Burrow, who first coined the term "group-analysis", later replaced it with "philoanalysis": thus he not only saved his own philosophy and clinical practice from the misleading suggestion that they referred only to the "group", in the sense of social organization, but with that term he also meant to emphasize the transgenerational and transpersonal *philum* that was the privileged focus of both his observational and theoretical work. The *philum* constitutes the *filigree* of every mental act, and as happens in clinical practice, so should group-analysis permanently apply itself to itself, like a conceptual apparatus, in order to distinguish its residual and parasitical elements from its own origins. This parasitical element is embryonic, that is inconsistent, and waiting for a further development. In short, "group-analysis must lay down on the analytic couch" (as Freud taught) in order to develop its full creative potential.

Starting from this application to itself, the most obvious applications are:

- Those referring to the clinical practice within the individual setting, where the group is made present and analyzed as the "inner *gruppalità* [groupality]" both of the patient and the analyst.
- Those referring to institutional groups such as companies, schools, medical and hospital organizations.
- Those referring to training experiences in large groups.

What are the most significant aspects emerging from the research being carried out on large groups by APRAGi (Anna Maria Traveni) and on medium-sized groups by De Maré, Pisani?

In these settings one may experience a series of emotions related to the condition of belonging *statu nascenti* to a group of persons among whom interpersonal relationships are as yet unborn, or still lay hidden. This is a total sense of belonging at an embryonic stage, that Bion termed "protomentality". This state of non-differentiation releases anxieties related to the blurring of individual identities, to a sense of mental vacuum, to the loss of the speech. To the "whole full" of transpersonal continuity there corresponds a sort of *horror vacui* that invades the individual mind when the clear borders of its self identity are lost. On the other hand, full immersion in a large group releases emotions, visions and dreams that, for their surprising intensity and orientation towards the same horizon, constitute the typical phenomenology of a protomental state-transpersonal in the newborn stage-of individual minds. This phenomenology-with its double edge of anguish and of mystical ecstasy (see W.R. Bion)-is as intense as in a one-on-one or small group experience; it represents the epitome of change felt as "catastrophic", which forms a nucleus around which develop processes related to *self-re-organization* (Edgar Morin) or *self-poesis* (Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela) of the cognitive system.

### **You have trained many group-analysts. What do you see as the new trends related to the dual concept "training/group-analysis"?**

Keeping in mind the rocky evolution in the study of training concepts and practice-to which APRAGI also contributed by publishing a book (3)- the Italian Group-Analytic Society (*SGAI*) has devoted particular attention in recent years to this theme, which will be the focus of its 4th Convention in 2002. Group-analytic thought plays a significant role in the "de-medicalisation" of analytic practice, and consequently in ridding it of the technological cages (that is, diagnostic and therapeutic bias) which have confined psychoanalysis. Group-analytic practice aims at transforming the relational stereotypes inscribed in the individual matrices

by giving value to the dynamic matrix established during an analytic relationship. But this dynamic matrix involves also the analyst, with both his/her individual matrices and his/her professional abilities. Thus, training should not be viewed as a process by which the “trainer” turns the head of the person being “trained”, but rather as a *self-poietical* (self-productive) process of the dynamic matrix in which all the parties play their part. In this perspective one can see a *continuum* amongst the processes of so-called “therapeutic” analysis, of so-called “supervision”, of experiential groups and, lastly, the processes which show up in the (endless) research groups of the analytic discipline.

**Is it possible to transfer the training experience acquired in supervision to other cases that cannot be examined under supervision?**

Bion used to say of himself: “I am an analyst in progress”, an idea that he generalized when he spoke of a sufficiently free man as “*em-mature*”, as someone who tends to maturity (itself never totally accomplished). So not only can the training gained in a supervised case be applied to other cases, but it is precisely this pre-condition that allows other cases to provide the possibility of further training for the analyst him/herself. According to the standard psychoanalytic view, supervision is a practice that verifies the pupil’s level of conformity to the theoretical and methodological canons, not of psychoanalysis in general (which perhaps never existed), but of the particular interpretation which a “didactic analyst” makes of the psychoanalytic skein. According to the group-analytic view, which is fully entitled within the approach to the “complexity”, a better term might be *meta-vision* rather than *supervision*, that is, a condition wherein the more experienced analyst invites the less experienced one to see from a different point of view both the relationship between the patient and his/her analyst and the relationship between the two analysts, as well as the relationship between the latter two and the theoretical model.

**From a group-analytic perspective, what changes have you noted in your patients over the last 40 years? Can you help us highlight some of the changing trends in suffering, and in syndromes as well?**

In his *Psychology of the Masses and Ego Analysis*, Freud already maintained that psychology, though focused on the individual, is social psychology all the same, a concept that group-analysis has totally absorbed by creating and focusing its attention on the keyword “matrix”. Man’s mental, behavioral and moral life carries values and models coming from his world of relationships (i.e. the family as part of his broader community context). No wonder, then, that even in disruptive scenarios, such a social footprint is revealed in the widest phenomenal variety. For instance, Freud, as a child of his own personal/cultural history, maintained that sexuality was the specific ground from which sprung good and evil in human beings. Morals have changed and sexuality can no longer be seen in the same physicalistic terms as it was then. For example, to reduce female problems today down to the paradigmatic phenomenon of “hysteric arch” (now nearly disappeared), to “penis envy”, would be like calling someone up from beyond the grave. The same can be said of the centrality of the father, that unchallenged *dominus* of family and social life, around whom Freud fantasized, resorting to disconnected excerpts from the Oedipus myth.

Western culture has changed profoundly in the last 50 years, and now the future is no longer neatly separated from the present, and “postponed” to some distant time, so that it can be only vaguely predictable. Our present no longer has that relative stability which characterized individual and social life for millions of years, because it is lacerated by a future that grasps at it from all sides. It is as though we were living in a seismic age whose tectonic plates were shifting and colliding with unprecedented frequency and intensity. To withstand change, man’s “constructions” must have the flexibility and elasticity equal to the geological upheaval produced by man himself. Even *tradition*, which gives the foundation of collective and individual identity, runs short of breath: even the past is traversed by the future, because every agreement, rebellion, and every past construction with meaning for the individual as well as for the community is an integral part of one’s projections into the future; if the future does not appear sufficiently stable, any plan will seem hazardous and precarious, and thus the past, traditions and matrices will seem either the only possible worlds wherein to find certainty (e.g. religious fundamentalism, or nationalism), or, on the contrary, they will pale in favor of an empty and frantic consumerism.

The contrast between these extremes, to which individual conscience and interpersonal relationships are deeply exposed, causes the so-called “new pathologies” manifested in individual behaviors. To use Bion’s enigmatic metaphor, we can say that modern man has no “memory of the future”, and that this particular form of *demenza* (4) (insanity) reduces man into either a skeleton of his past (the rigid fossils of own tradition) or to a totally empty present as seen in ever more common depressions, or in the spiral of eating disorders or drug and alcohol addiction.

**What you have sketched allows me to grasp the original contribution of group-analysis as a means for reading social phenomena in today’s complex society.**

A sociological or cultural-anthropological analysis cannot suffice today to account for the relationship between social morals and the peculiarities of individuals. It is necessary to find the link between macro or micro-social phenomena and the individual’s cognitive and affective aspects; a link which in some way recreates, in the mind’s complexity, the recursive circularity between the individual and society. I have found this link joining together the matrix and the specifically human, self re-organizing *self-poesis*. The matrix is the transgenerational component of individual identity and is from its origins exposed to an incessant reorganization of the self-poietical device; *idem* is the term I use to define an individual’s identity so constituted and in some way definable at every instant, whereas *autòs* is the undefinable author of every transformation process of the *idem*. Between these two polarities there occurs a dialectical relationship, such as that in the *polis* between conservatives and reformers. I would compare *idem* and *autòs* to an inner parliament, that is, the place which gives rise to the Speech/Law that legitimizes the experience of the individual’s auto-nomy.

Moreover, the family institution has lost much of its power in recent decades, due to its progressive extroversion into a wider social web. The massive educational proxy at a very young age, the intrusion of consumer and mass-media idols, the relativism of ideals and values which are as fleeting as fashion, have all marginalized family ties: family is no longer the privileged place of the transgenerational transcendence of beliefs and morals, replaced by multiplying ephemeral aggregations of youth within which is rife a certain *mal de vivre*.

**To whom is group-analysis suited?**

If by “whom” one means the individual as a whole and not a “patient”, my immediate response would be: whoever asks for it. During the first session, there is a mutual introduction, in the sense that our “histories” meet: obviously, not in the sense that I recount my life story, but in the sense of where I am now in my cultural and professional experience. So when a patient complains of some trouble s/he wishes to get rid of, I let him/her see that I have no cures, simply because I think that his/her discomfort is not “caused” by an agent that I can neutralize. Using the elements of what s/he has told me, I sketch a picture that represents, in various ways, my metaphor (mentioned above) of the “inner parliament”. The need for change and the need for conservation come face to face in such a tumultuous way that no Speech can emerge: what I can offer is to help the patient with this “parliamentary debate” which is in some way blocked or severely distorted. Were the patient to ask me for some salvational intervention, and were I to think that I could give it, I would but ratify the failure of his/her “parliamentary” effort. Basically, I try to offer the patient a pathway, offering myself as a “skipper”, to use an image provided by one of my patients at the end of his analysis. I know well that such a statement is not the solution once and for all, and that at any moment, a request for analysis can be motivated in the interest of conservation or of change: the analysis could be group-analytically defined as an analysis of the *questions* incessantly asked by one of the many components belonging to the “inner groupality”. If the patient perceives our mutual introduction as a “starting point”, the adventure begins, otherwise it does not.

**So, group-analysis cannot be considered a mere technique, but there is much more to it, perhaps as a model for thought or action?**

Any human practice derives its legitimacy from a theoretical, ideal or ethical basis. I construct my group-analytic thought and practice on the basis of an *hermeneutic psychagogy*. I do not propose any models, at least not intentionally, but rather try to arouse in the patient a loving curiosity for his/her own history which, no matter how painful it may have been, is still the only one s/he has, the only experiences available for the constructions that his/her taste and *genius* can plan within the limits of his/her autonomy.

*Translated from the Italian by Valentina Tenedini*

## **Notes:**

(1) Sigmund H. Foulkes, *Group Therapy. An Overview*, Wolberg and Schwartz, eds. (New York: Intercontinental Medical Book Corp., 1973).

(2) On Bion's "satanic jargon", see Diego Napolitani, "Psychoanalysis is had his day", *Journal of European Psychoanalysis*, 8-9, Winter-Fall 1999, pp. 36-8 [Editor's Note].

(3) Nadia Benedetto, ed., *Pensare l'Apprendere* (Rome: Upsel 1994).

(4) The Italian word *demenza* means literally *de-mind* [Editor's Note].